What Else Can You Do
With Your Course Management System?

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Abstract

Besides distance education, hybrid courses, and course enhancement, what else can you do with your course management system? Hampden-Sydney College has been stretching its basic level Blackboard system to fill a variety of needs. This presentation will start with a demonstration to showcase some of these uses such as engaging incoming freshmen prior to their first semester, facilitating faculty colleague evaluation, training library student assistants, and enhancing departmental collaboration. The demonstration will be followed by an open discussion to brainstorm other possible uses of a course management system.

Introduction/Background

Hampden-Sydney College is a four-year traditional liberal arts college for men located on a 660-acre campus in rural southside Virginia. Founded in 1775, H-SC is the tenth oldest college in the country. The mission of the College is "to form good men and good citizens in an atmosphere of sound learning."

Hampden-Sydney men are traditional aged and reside on the campus. Enrollment is kept at approximately 1000 students. The College has no distance education program.

With a faculty of around 100 members, the College is able to keep class sizes small. In addition to this student/faculty ratio of 10:1, a large percentage of the faculty elect to live on campus, which means that there is great interaction between the students and the faculty.

Blackboard was acquired in May of 2000 as a means to enhance and broaden the already existing high level of communication between students and faculty. It adds yet another layer of support to the traditional classroom experience found at H-SC.

Currently over 50 percent of the faculty actively use Blackboard to supplement their classroom teaching. In addition, of all classes offered each semester, over 60 percent has a Blackboard component.

Expanded Use

As with any course management system when it becomes an integral part of campus life, it is inevitable that we would look to find other uses for it beyond the classroom. Moreover, the

monetary commitment had already been made as well as the time consuming and emotional effort of training faculty and students to use and rely upon it. Therefore, practicality dictated that we look to stretch our course management system to meet other needs.

Incoming Freshmen

The incoming freshmen class was a likely place to expand our use of Blackboard. We had a two-fold mission in working with this group. First, we wanted to find a way to get this population accustomed to using Blackboard and its features before starting classes so that they were comfortable with the system when required to use it.

Second, in an effort to increase the retention of students, we thought it best to have them use Blackboard during the summer before they arrive. The idea is to begin the bonding process to the College as early as possible. Also, through the discussion boards, we try to establish communication between advisees so that they can begin conversation prior to arrival. This way the new students get to know other students before they arrive on campus for the fall semester.

Freshmen are sent an information packet by the Dean of Academic Success when they are assigned a faculty advisor. In the packet, each student receives a letter informing him of his Blackboard username and password. He is encouraged to visit the Blackboard site to create a short web page about himself as well as to find out more information about the College, his advisor, and the other advisees.

The basic information in each course is the same. There are discussion questions to stimulate conversation about what they expect of the College, what they are doing over the summer, and what items they think they should bring with them. Welcome messages from the President and upper administrative staff is included.

Each advisor is then free to customize his or her course. They can post a picture of themselves and some biographical information. They add additional discussion questions and include documents that they have developed to help their advisees adjust to college life. Each advisor has a peer advisor who is set up with the same authorization in Blackboard as the advisor so that the he can also load material and monitor discussions.

At the core of each course is the series of pictorial tours of the College. These were designed with the input of freshmen in their first semester. The tours show places on campus that freshmen need to know when they first arrive.

Campus Tours include:
Library	a detailed look at each floor, including classrooms.
Health Center	a look at the facility and the staff as well as services provided.
Dining Hall	shows various dining areas, the cafeteria line, and ground floor pub.
Classroom Buildings	a few sample classrooms from each building.
Security Office	photos of officers and discussion of services.
Computing Center	a look at the computer lab, the PC repair area, and the help

	desk.
Support Services (Writing Center, International Studies, Academic Counselor,)	
	for each there are photos of the staff and the facility.
College Church	a look at the church and its classroom facilities as well as a greeting from the pastor.
Athletic Facilities	each gym and outdoor sports area is depicted.
Dean of Students	the Dean, his staff and their services.
Fraternities	a view of each house and its charge.
Fire Department	the facility and its student volunteers.

For each week during the summer, one new tour is made available. This helps to keep students interested in the course and give them yet another reason to check in often as the summer progresses.

Faculty Colleague Evaluation

When faculty are being assessed for contract renewal, tenure, or promotion, all members of the faculty are given the opportunity to voice their opinions. These opinions are kept anonymous; therefore, email is not an option for soliciting them. Paper responses have been the traditional means for receiving these comments. However, in an effort to reduce paperwork for faculty and encourage greater participation in the assessment process, colleague evaluations have been moved to Blackboard. Faculty log on to a course set up specifically for them to use to submit their comments on their colleagues who are under review. With the move to this electronic format, there has been an increased number of faculty submitting comments.

Library Student Assistants

Because the library is operated solely by student assistants for forty hours each week, there has always been a manual and resource guide available to them. However, with Blackboard in place, moving this essential information to an easily accessible electronic format seemed logical. The Blackboard format adds a level of comfort for our students who generally prefer electronic resources over print and also allows for timelier updating and a greater ease of communication among the assistants and between the assistants and the supervisors.

To create the course, the parts of the existing paper manual that were not already in an electronic format were either scanned or re-keyed and then loaded into Blackboard. Student assistants were assigned to this task.

Blackboard features make the enhanced electronic version of the manual far superior to the print. They include:

Staff Information: We include pictures, phone numbers and areas of responsibility for all librarians and staff as well as student assistants.

Announcements: This allows us to quickly pass information on to the student assistants. For example, we can easily post notices concerning problems with the compact shelving, weather related emergencies, timecard deadlines, or a sudden rush of students from a par-

ticular professor. In addition, announcements can be recycled from semester to semester as events re-occur.

Statistics: We can see who is using the material and when. If they are viewing a certain document repeatedly it; signals us that we many need to have more training in that area.

Future areas of development include the use of online quizzes to test students on the various parts of their library assignments and the use of video to show opening and closing procedures as well as other complex tasks such as barcoding or creating patron records.

A by-product of this course is that it has started to become a repository for all library procedures. All librarians and staff have access to this course and often make use of it when they are responsible for opening the library on snow days or during other emergencies. In addition, as new librarians or staff members are hired, they are referred to this course as a resource for learning the daily operations of the library.

The major downside of the reliance on this resource is that, of course, it is not available during power failures. Therefore, the procedures for power failures are still kept in print format.

Departmental Communication

Before Blackboard, if an academic department wanted to share ideas or conduct a conversation electronically they were limited to email. However, with Blackboard departmental communication has become more enhanced. Two departments on campus currently make extensive of use of Blackboard for departmental communication – Rhetoric and Western Culture.

The Rhetoric Department was the first to explore Blackboard as a mean of sharing and enhancing departmental communication. They were in the midst of developing their first wireless classroom and needed to share ideas on everything from tables and chairs to software and teaching styles. With Blackboard, they had one place to collect URLs for various elements of their new classroom that all members of the department could view and comment upon. They created group pages where those assigned to developing a teaching workshop could easily communicate that was separate from the general discussions. They also could post proposed syllabi changes and solicit their colleagues' opinions. In general, they had one place where all members of the department could go to share ideas and express opinions knowing that only their departmental colleagues had access.

The Western Culture department is composed of faculty members from all other departments on campus. As they are not a formal department, they have taken a different tract with their community Blackboard course. They use it as a repository for classroom resources. Maps are posted that everyone has access to and can use as necessary in their teaching. Since the three levels of classes offered in this department are sequential and each level has a core set of material that must be covered, each professor has the discretion of selecting any other material that they wish their class to study. Therefore, on their common Blackboard course, faculty share syllabi so that all members of the department know what the others are teaching. They also have resources available based on the specific time periods and subjects covered in the three semester sequence.

These resources can be URLs or notes provided from local campus experts such as art historians, renaissance history scholars, or Shakespeare experts.

Future Growth Areas

As Blackboard use across the College continues to grow and as students have become accustomed to using Blackboard for their classes, they request its use in more areas of their campus life. Future areas that appear to be ready for extended Blackboard use include the following:

Clubs

The Bicycle Club, the Men's Chorus, the Pep Band, and the Pre-Health Society are just a few of the clubs that already have a presence on Blackboard. They use these courses to communicate with members and plan events. The Men's Chorus, for example, records their practice sessions and posts these audio files for all the members to evaluate.

Student Honors Projects

Similar to Masters' thesis committees, students doing honor's projects have several faculty members on a committee to oversee this work. Honors' students have begun to request Blackboard space where all the members of their committee can access research material and rough drafts and engage in online discussion about the project and its progress.

Student Senate

The newly elected president of the Student Senate (whose class is the first to have had the use of Blackboard since their freshman year) has just requested space on Blackboard for the Student Senate. He envisions a space where all students will be able to have access to Senate documents and a means of easy communication with their Senate representative.

Faculty Research

Faculty are beginning to explore the use of Blackboard as a tool in their professional research. With its survey feature, Blackboard can be used to assess any population. It can be a repository for collaborative projects, and it can be used to develop assessment measures for current and future students.

Conclusion

We have become comfortable with our course management system – Blackboard – in the classroom but have only just begun to tap into its potential outside the classroom. Blackboard is here to stay on campus. Now that student and faculty alike have come to rely on it, why not look to see what other uses we can make of it? What's next? Ideas anyone?